F
351
H813

Hosmer, James Kendall,

The Mississippi Valley organized.

[Reprinted from the Atlantic Monthly for November, 1901.]

Class F351
Book .H813

F351
.H813

v. 88

THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY ORGANIZED

BY

JAMES K. HOSMER

Reprinted from the Atlantic Monthly for November, 1901

THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY ORGANIZED.

The territory of Oklahoma, with the Indian Territory the last fragment of the Mississippi Valley not yet constitutionally organized, has at the present time every requisite for statehood, and will, so says report, apply at the next session of Congress for admission to the Union. The moment when the great basin becomes occupied throughout by proper commonwealths, these taking the place of the wilderness which a hundred and fifty years ago was quite unbroken, is a fitting one in which to review its story.

The Mississippi Valley has long been famed as the most remarkable river basin of the world. While that of the Amazon may surpass it in area, the South American basin is far less available for human uses. The northern valley has a climate well suited in every part for the better breeds of men. Millions of its acres are surpassingly fertile; where tillage fails, the herdsman and shepherd find opportunity; or, if both farmer and ranchman miss their chance, the miner wins from desert or mountain coal, oil, and almost every useful metal. Scarcely a square mile but yields gifts that are precious. It is the very lap of Plenty.

Into this favored region are gathered some thirty-five million English-speaking men, the largest compact body, except possibly the population of Great Britain, to be found in the world. Here are half the states of the American Union, sending their waters to the Gulf through the great river. Near its heart is the centre of population of the Union; the centre of influence, too, is here, as each decade shows more plainly. In our history there are no more heroic figures than have arisen here; nor is the general average of intelligence, energy, and manly virtue anywhere higher. In no other region of the earth, probably, are the conditions so favorable for the best human development.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, in the valley, the wilderness was scarcely broken. Coronado's superb march from the Gulf of California to the Missouri River (even so far, it has been thought, he may have penetrated) had left no trace except in the pages of the chroniclers; nor was there trace of Hernando de Soto. The French, in their turn, had done little more than the Spaniards. Marquette, Hennepin, La Salle, and their fellow pathbreakers had threaded the streams and pierced the woods with the sturdiest heroism, but to little purpose as far as the redemption of the area to civilization was concerned. The forests were unfelled, the prairies unploughed; the Indians still possessed the land. In the half dozen clusters of cabins scattered from New Orleans to the Great Lakes, the likelihood was far greater that the habitan would sink into the savage than that the savage would rise into something higher. But the subduers were at hand.

In 1748, an explorer penetrating the virgin land had named a river and a mountain gap after the proud-prancing Cumberland, a great hero of those days; oddly perpetuating thus a memory of the Jacobite crisis in the nomenclature of a land that was to care nothing for either James or George. But the first symptom of an interest in the thirteen colonies in the world beyond the mountains was the dispatching, in 1753, of the youth George Washington into the woods; his mission being to inquire of the French commandant at the head springs of the Alleghany, where the French came in by a short portage from the Great Lakes, what were the intentions of France, and to explain what were the claims of Virginia. Presently came Braddock's attempt, and in 1759 the event on the Plains of Abraham. The colonial world was now well alive, and straightway began a movement for the winning of the West.

Early in the eighteenth century, the Scotch-Irish, a race doubled and twisted in the making, flung by persecution and hardship from island to island, knit and toughened in the stress of exile and war, came in large numbers to America. They were received especially at ports of the middle and Southern colonies, and their taste and enterprise soon led them away from the seaboard into the backwoods. At a synod held at an early day in Philadelphia, John Caldwell, grandfather of John Caldwell Calhoun, proposed to the governor that if freedom of conscience were allowed, the Scotch-Irish would fend off the Indian danger at the back of the province. The bargain was made, and well did the Scotch-Irish perform their part. Following the valley between the Alleghanies and the Blue Ridge in a movement at the time little marked, assimilating new elements, Huguenot, German, and English, they reached, in a generation or so, the highlands of western North Carolina, and here were recruited by bands of their kindred coming west from their landing place at Charleston. A race better fitted than this one to play the part of frontiersmen has never appeared. As an axe has welded upon its front a mass of steel before the softer iron, a mass capable of taking on a keen cutting edge, not to be

dinted or broken by anything it may have to cleave or hew, so, providentially it would seem, the Anglo-Saxon advance was provided with a Scotch-Irish cutting edge of extraordinary temper. Presently the pioneers were on the Mississippi watershed; and hardly had they entered, when, at a clump of cabins on a mountain stream, the "Watauga Association" was established, a system of government for a little state formed after the best Anglo-Saxon precedents. Thus significantly on the very threshold began the organizing, James Robertson, a Scotch-Irishman, and the Huguenot John Sevier standing out as leading spirits; and shortly after, Daniel Boone and his men, just established in Kentucky, followed the example. Now occurred an incident which showed plainly how the pioneers meant to stand. In the late spring of 1775, a newcomer to a camp having read from a scrap of newspaper the announcement of the event of the 19th of April, the backwoodsmen forthwith baptized the stockade, and the town that sprang from it, Lexington.

The backwoodsmen were effective strivers in the struggle for independence, though they had a foe to face in the Indians, nearer at hand and more terrible than the soldiers of George III. At King's Mountain, in 1780, when things were darkest, the men who had crossed the watershed, turning back under Sevier and Shelby, decided the day for the Americans; and still earlier, in 1778, George Rogers Clark, in one of the most extraordinary of campaigns, won for Virginia, and ultimately for the United States, the great Northwest. In the drama of the Revolution, there is, perhaps, no episode so picturesque as this enterprise of Clark. As if fortune loved so brave a soul, he happened to strike in at the most opportune moment. As he laid his plan before Patrick Henry, governor of Virginia, the news came of Burgoyne's surrender, and soon after of the French alliance. His first task with his little army of two hundred was to win the Creoles of the Wabash and the Illinois, — a task now not difficult, since the Americans had defeated the conquerors of Montcalm, and been taken into friendship by the French king. To gain the Indians was a far different achievement, as they gathered from the remotest points, and with implacable faces confronted the young leader at the Cahokia council fire. They were won, however, by a union of bravado with the deftest tact; after which came a problem where difficulty culminated, the coping with Hamilton, the capable British commander at Detroit. How Clark stole upon Vincennes, in February, through the drowned lands of the Wabash, his men plunging to the waist, to the breast, at last to the chin, through the icy flood; how he fought their discouragement, now by sternness, now by contriving to turn hardship into a joke; how the fortress was captured at last, almost without bloodshed, the whole campaign, indeed, presenting a spectacle of fine strategy and iron persistency, with almost nothing sanguinary, — all this is remarkable in the history of warfare. The means of Clark were insignificant; the results he achieved in the highest degree momentous, — achievements performed with swiftness and ease springing from a high degree of genius. Our military history has no page more brilliant.

Tracing, as we are trying to do, the organization of a wilderness into a well-ordered state, the year 1787, in which fell the adoption of the Federal Constitution and the Northwest Ordinance, is beyond all others epoch-making. In the framing of these most mighty instruments the men of the Mississippi Valley had no part; yet no other region has derived so much from their far-reaching, beneficent action. Kentucky in 1792 and Tennessee in 1796 came forward into statehood, heading the recruitment which has brought the confederation of thirteen up to (if we count Oklahoma) forty-six. The states of the Mississippi

Valley, more than a score in number, have come into being as a consequence of these instruments; most of them with slavery prohibited, with the sixteenth section of each township set apart for the support of public schools, with every point of Anglo-Saxon freedom effectually guaranteed. No sooner had their ordinances gone fairly into effect than the area over which their influence was to be felt was immensely increased.

In the nineteenth century, perhaps in all the centuries, there has been no hero quite so picturesque and magnetic as Napoleon. Refuse though we may to regard him as good, or, in the highest sense, great, yet there is no such other name to conjure by, and the spell he exercises over men seems to increase rather than diminish. Probably in no previous portrayal has that towering personality appeared to a greater extent unique and ultrahuman than in the presentment lately made by Lord Rosebery in his Napoleon, the Last Phase. With the opening of the nineteenth century the Mississippi Valley felt a memorable effect from the commotion at that time changing the face of Europe. The French Revolution having taken its course, the fateful Corsican was in full career, having reached, through the campaigns of 1796, of Egypt, and of Marengo, the position of First Consul. While there can be no doubt as to the extent to which Napoleon affected Europe, have we fairly made it real to ourselves that scarcely any other man has affected so momentously America? Washington was the father of the country; Lincoln preserved it; Napoleon doubled its area. The conjunction seems grotesque, but it can be justified.

The addition to our Union of the vast territory lying between the great river and the Rocky Mountains was a result of French statesmanship, and ought to be so described. Jefferson and his negotiators, Livingston and Monroe, played but a secondary part in the transaction. That this great area is ours to-day is simply and solely because the exigency of Napoleon at the moment made it expedient for him that it should be ours. It was not asked for by us; nor, in giving it to us, was there in his mind any thought of our interests. Louisiana was simply tossed over to us because the stress of the occasion made this disposal of it convenient. At first the arbiter had had a different thought. Remembering the loss of New France, in the days of Wolfe, as a terrible disgrace, Napoleon had dreamed of recovering it, as his hand grew powerful. But things went badly in San Domingo, and at home a terrible pressure was close at hand. It was becoming plain that the whole of Europe must be confronted. Napoleon, no less prudent than bold, saw in time the folly of engaging his hands in an American complication, when foes were so near. He wanted money, too, for his combat. Just at the moment, the Americans, desiring free navigation of the Mississippi, made an offer to buy the mouth of the river, and the town of New Orleans which guarded it. They asked for nothing more; they dreamed of nothing more. "That you shall have," said Napoleon, of a sudden changing his policy, and driving at once, as was his wont, impetuously to his end; "and besides, you shall have the vast wilderness lying north and west. I wish to keep it out of the hands of England, whom only in this way I can baffle, and the fifteen million dollars which you shall give me for it I will use in preparations against her." So Louisiana fell to us; for who, in those years, could stand against Napoleon! In the transaction, the First Consul gave, for the first time, free course to his autocratic will; for he rode cavalierly, as his brother Lucien has graphically narrated, over the opposition of his family and the muttered disapproval of the Chambers and the nation. Shortly afterward he had grasped crown and sceptre, having increased two-

fold, by his first imperial nod, the area of the United States. In the whole history of the Mississippi Valley, there is nothing more startling than the way in which this Olympian figure touched momentarily, but so momentously, the course of its development.

The great new West beyond the river, thus acquired, and immediately after explored by the stout pathbreakers Lewis and Clark, fell early into danger of being cut off from the nation to which it had come. What, precisely, Aaron Burr had planned has not been definitely ascertained; but Spain was to be robbed and the United States to be dismembered that Aaron Burr might sit exalted. That he was foiled was due, possibly, in the main, to the action of a person the most characteristic type of the frontiersman, perhaps, that the border has ever furnished; though the importance of the man, and of the stand he then took, did not appear until later. When Burr, pursuing his scheme, had reached Tennessee, he encountered there a spare, fiery, impetuous figure, of Scotch-Irish blood, major general of the Tennessee militia, — Andrew Jackson. To win Jackson would have been for Burr a great, it may be a decisive thing; for already Jackson showed a most masterful spirit. He felt strongly the fascination of the conspirator; but when, in Burr's talk, there fell out a hint at disunion, the glamour vanished; the frontiersman could not be moved, blocking thus early in his career the course of separatism. Suppose that, in those uncertain days, Jackson had taken the other turn. What he could do at the head of a body of frontier riflemen he was before long to show.

But Jackson was to go far higher. Napoleon fell at last from his high estate, and languished in Elba. Was the Mississippi Valley really to escape the clutch of England? England put on shipboard nearly twenty thousand fighting men, soldiers and sailors, and, in the lull of European conflict, sent the expedition to the mouths of the Mississippi. The captains of Nelson marshaled the ships; the veterans of Wellington stood ready for the shore work. Civil officials were provided; for, when the easy victory had been gained, the land possessed and newly organized was to become a Canada of the South, balancing the Canada of the North. It was a motley crowd that confronted the great army before New Orleans, January 8, 1815: pirates from Barataria, French and Spaniards from the ancient Creole city, now and then among them an old soldier from the Napoleonic wars, negroes and Indians, waifs and strays from everywhere; but among them stood a body of Tennessee and Kentucky riflemen. That day, Andrew Jackson, as leader, showed a power of command quite extraordinary. Through personal force he welded these fragments, so ill assorted, into an effective army; so that after the English line had charged, three generals, — the commander among them, — seven colonels, and the rank and file by thousands lay prostrate, and there was nothing for it but retreat. Andrew Jackson became the leading man in the country, an extraordinary force both for evil and for good in the shaping of American destinies. Raised to the highest place, he was the main promoter of the spoils system; in finance he was a bull in a china shop; in dealing with foreign nations a bully, always with a chip on his shoulder. But, on the other hand, in spite of ignorant violence, he set an example of character always honest, chivalric, and nobly virile; and from him more than from any other American, with the possible exception of Daniel Webster, proceeded the influence which made it possible for Abraham Lincoln to hold us together as a nation. The landscape of our past would indeed be lacking, if, looking backward, we failed to encounter there the great Scotch-Irish frontiersman, in the high places by force of his grit and genius.

Lacking a thread on which may be strung, in a convenient order, the details of the development of the Mississippi Valley during the nineteenth century, nothing better can be done than to trace the consequences flowing from the introduction of two machines, — the steam engine as applied to traffic and communication, and the cotton gin. These potent devices have shaped our ends almost as if they were divinities instead of mere constructions of matter. The steamboat in the West dates from the moment when, through Jackson's arm, we became secure from foreign attack; the Enterprise and Ætna — one of which had carried down a cargo of ammunition for the army which had defeated Pakenham — being the first craft to make their way upstream from New Orleans to the Ohio. But deferring until later a consideration of the debt of our valley to the power of steam, the influence of the other invention, Eli Whitney's cotton gin, is even more noteworthy; for the cotton gin, besides affecting vastly material well-being, changed men's ways of looking at life, and caused to be set up new standards of right and wrong.

From that early time when the captive in war, instead of being put to death, was *preserved*, made a *servus*, down through all the ages, human slavery has existed, and even in the eighteenth century, up to near the end, there were few indeed disposed to question the right of it. Merchants of Boston and Newport used their ships in the slave trade without scruple; and if a doctor of divinity, wanting a servant, shipped a hogshead of rum to the West Coast, to be exchanged there for a kidnapped boy, such a transaction, far from being held discreditable, was not accounted even eccentric. The South favored slavery no more than the North: the anti-slavery clause of the Northwest Ordinance was introduced by Southern representatives; humane spirits like Washington and Jefferson, inclined to emancipate their slaves, were as numerous South as North. At the close of the eighteenth century slavery appeared to be dying everywhere in America: as it failed, the conscience of the land asserted itself as to its evil in a way quite new. It was the general expectation that negro slavery would soon disappear. It has long been held that the cotton gin, invented in 1793, by suddenly lending new effectiveness to the work of negroes in the South, wrought a change, spiritual as well as material, — the economic advantage lulling to sleep the awakening moral sense. As years passed and cotton became king, slavery grew to be considered as never before, the very apple of the patriot's eye. Meantime, at the North, no economic advantage intervening to favor the preservation of slavery, it followed the course of decay upon which it had entered, and died out; and as the century advanced, it came to be regarded, under the influence of earnest teachers, as the chief of human evils.

Sundered thus as the North and South became in their interests and moral conceptions, a conflict was inevitable, and it was first joined in the Mississippi Valley. Before 1820, the streams of immigration, coming into the Northwest Territory up through Kentucky from the south, through Ohio and along the Lakes from the northeast, were jarring sharply, as they met in Indiana and Illinois, over slavery; and now, under the especial leadership of Henry Clay, the Missouri Compromise, the first effort to adjust the difficulty, was put through the federal Congress. Slavery being admitted into Missouri, it was ordained by Congress that all the territory north of Missouri should remain forever free; and with this settlement the country went on in a somewhat troubled peace for a full generation.

But the black shadow was far enough from being removed. Pro-slavery feeling in the South grew constantly more

intense, the institution coming to stand as the very corner stone of the social structure; in the North abolitionism became constantly more earnest, and increasing numbers fell under the spell of its great advocates. When, in 1854, Stephen A. Douglas, of Illinois, declared in the Senate that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, that Congress had no right to declare territory slave or free, that only the people on the territory had that right, — in a word, the doctrine of "squatter sovereignty," — it was the forerunner of a cyclone.

At once Douglas embodied the doctrine of squatter sovereignty in the Nebraska Bill, — the whole valley north and west of Missouri being called Nebraska, — and the great war of words began which was the prelude to the actual clash of arms. In Congress, Seward, Chase, Sumner, Giddings, Wade, as leaders of the Free-Soilers, ranged themselves against Douglas, who rallied to his side champions especially from the South. Kansas, which had been set off from Nebraska, became a seat of tumult, the Northern immigrants coming in such numbers as to arouse in the South the fear that squatter sovereignty would be disastrous to it: incursions of border ruffians were encouraged, to prevent such a catastrophe. The moment when the crisis became tinged with the hue of blood was marked by the starting forth of that most ominous of apparitions, John Brown of Ossawatomie. "Without shedding of blood there can be no remission of sins!" he cried, as he smote; and when, flitting to the valley of the Potomac, he appeared on the border of the South, his fateful voice summoning the slaves to rise against their masters, all chance for peace was over. The old man's body might lie mouldering in its far Northern grave, but his soul marched on in trooping armies. Douglas, meantime, had been confronted in his own state by a champion he could not vanquish. They wrestled in field after field, — on the hillside, on the prairie, in the forest, by the shores of great rivers; the people gathering by many thousands to listen, till the blue canopy alone furnished an adequate auditorium. Abraham Lincoln came off victor; and now, while the South, state by state, ranged itself in rebellion, he stood opposed for the saving of the Union.

While in all this preliminary struggle between slavery and freedom it was the Mississippi Valley mainly which formed the arena, that gloomy distinction can hardly be claimed for it after the cannon began to thunder. The focus and centre of the Civil War was on the soil of Virginia, where the largest armies, and as far as the South was concerned the ablest generals, fought for four years, back and forth: on the one hand to seize Washington, on the other hand to seize Richmond. The operations of the Civil War in the Mississippi Valley are to be regarded as a vast subsidiary movement by which ultimately the flank of Lee was turned.

But if the war in the Mississippi Valley was in a sense subsidiary, it was by no means of small account. Military energy did its utmost. Rarely have armies been more vast, and only Borodino and Leipsic surpass in appalling grandeur the greater battles. The Army of Virginia, at the end of four years, lay surrounded and helpless, an isolated nucleus of warlike energy from which every supporting connection and attachment had been knocked away. On one side was the sea, in the hands of its foes; on the other Thomas lowered, about to pour through the passes of the Alleghanies. Sherman, charged with lightnings, rolled up from the south, a tempest gathering fury as it sped, while on the north Grant smote implacably. Not till then was Lee beaten. Appomattox came inevitably, and for the Confederacy all was 'over. Slavery was destroyed, and the Union was made secure.

Strange indeed was the development

which sprang from the cotton gin; scarcely less momentous has been the influence of the steam engine as applied to traffic and communication. The locomotive has succeeded, and often superseded, the steamboat, with results that are modifying all the continents. The new West, which has come to pass in the old Louisiana of the Purchase, was before the war in a most incipient stage, and as it stands to-day may properly be called the child of the locomotive. While that extraordinary machine in the eastern half of the valley has been a powerful modifier, in the western half it has worked almost as a creator. It has made possible a reclaiming and populating more rapid than has ever before been seen when new lands were occupied. The unknown wilderness of Jefferson's day has become filled throughout with fully organized commonwealths, and is about, with the admission of Oklahoma, to become, so to speak, politically mature. Whether such a rapid exploitation of the national domain will be for the ultimate benefit of our country, or otherwise, may well be questioned. Our grandchildren may wish their forefathers had gone more slowly.

There are in the Mississippi Valley pleasant signs that, although heretofore railroads and the country tributary to them have often jarred, the expediency of harmony is beginning to be recognized, with most happy results. That the road may flourish, the country through which it passes must be prosperous. What better than for the road to help the country prosper? It has helped; and in this way: Some proper official, — the general freight agent, it may be, — studying his districts to find out for what they were best fitted, using the helps which in his high place he could easily command, has discovered, perhaps, that tomatoes can well be raised here, potatoes here; that here there is a fine opportunity for creameries, and here again a good field for poultry and eggs. Straightway he enters upon a campaign of education. To each village, hamlet, crossroads, teachers are sent to convert the farmers from their bad methods or unprofitable crops. They are instructed as to the better ways and the more marketable products. Finally, the road engages to find a sale for what is raised, and to carry it to market at a rate which will make sure the farmers' profit. When all is done, the country, from being poverty-stricken, has become a scene of plenty; while the beneficent road — beneficent not from a philanthropic impulse, but simply because it pays to be so — reaps a vast advantage from having tributary a body of rich and contented communities, instead of a population depressed and struggling. In many places of the Mississippi Valley these methods have found trial, and the invariable happy result makes it not doubtful that it will influence the policy of the future.

That we suffer at present is largely due to the fact that, in the immense complexities which modern life develops, we do not at first grasp the right handle. We may hope it will be better some day as regards the problems the railroad gives rise to; as regards the problems, also, which the cotton gin has given rise to; for, though slavery has vanished, the black shadow has not ceased to hang heavily over the Mississippi Valley as well as elsewhere. So, too, as regards our problems in general, — but a few have been hinted at, — the manful heart will not consider any of them hopeless, and never before since the world began have so many good hands and brains as now been ready to work to remove the difficulties.

The Mississippi Valley organized, — a basin of unexampled resources, occupied by thirty-five million English-speaking men possessed of the ancient, well-ordered Anglo-Saxon freedom! With the admission of Oklahoma to statehood, the Mississippi Valley may be said to be politically complete. The constitutional

framework will be all in place in twenty-three commonwealths. As a vine expands over its supporting trellis, so the life of these millions will be upheld and guided in future years by these constructions, begun before Alfred's day, but confirmed and perfected, during many centuries, by liberty-loving peoples. With their life so braced and directed, the states of the Mississippi Valley possess the most favorable conditions for a perfect evolution. While their history in the past is full of interest, they can face the future with high hope.

James K. Hosmer.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 014 540 626 2